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## Talking the Talk – How Cities Shape Migration Narratives on the Global Agenda

[BLOG \(/COMMENTARY-AND-ANALYSIS/BLOGS\)](#)

[GLOBAL INSIGHT \(/COMMENTARY-AND-ANALYSIS/BLOGS/GLOBAL-INSIGHT\)](#) BY JANINA STÜRNER



Cities use migration-focused narratives not only in an attempt to influence global discussions, but also to achieve concrete outcomes for transforming local realities.

Migration in the 21st century is an urban phenomenon. As more and more people move to urban areas, cities all over the world develop experience in addressing human mobility. However, in a globalized world, local engagement is no longer enough. Facing a lack of support and a disconnect between national migration policies and local integration strategies, a small but growing number of cities are increasingly engaging in diplomacy to reshape migration narratives at the global level.

At times caught up in the polarized politicization of migration issues, intergovernmental and national debates frequently lack the pragmatic outcome orientation urgently needed by communities of origin, transit, and destination. This is even more true in the context of the COVID-19 crisis, where exclusionary policies may not only hinder municipal strategies for social cohesion but also affect public health.

As a result, some proactive forerunner cities reason that instead of mending national or international policies through local action, bringing municipal expertise directly into intergovernmental decision-making may be a more efficient way to reshape policy narratives on migration. Cities have done so through their contributions to the Global Compacts for Migration and Refugees, the creation of the diplomacy-oriented Mayors Migration Council (MMC) and the establishment of the Mayors Mechanism in the Global Forum on Migration and Development (GFMD).

## Believing is Seeing—The Importance of Narratives

As stories about the world, narratives constitute essential foundations of policy-making. While a security narrative would frame migration as a problem, a development narrative highlights how migrants or refugees contribute to society. Naturally, the reality on the ground is never as clear-cut, yet it makes a big difference to policy outcomes whether decision-makers perceive an issue as a problem to be contained or an opportunity to be seized. Narratives also create action imperatives – telling us who should take responsibility and what should be done to address a topic. International migration has traditionally been closely tied to national sovereignty and reserved for intergovernmental debates at the global level. Nevertheless, cities, as well as regional and international actors like the European Union, UN-Habitat, or IOM, contribute effectively to the urbanization of international migration governance by highlighting the local dimension of cross-border movements. At the same time, forerunner cities aspire to play “glocal” roles—connecting local realities to global policy-making processes. These cities globalize urban topics such as social cohesion or access to services by demonstrating their relevance for the global migration agenda. After all, who better to address these topics globally than those who already know how they play out locally? Narratives thus matter. And cities do not only use them in an attempt to influence global discussions but also to achieve concrete outcomes for transforming local realities.

Let’s have a look at the four most salient narratives.

### **The Migration and Development Narrative**

While recognizing that migration poses challenges, most cities engaged in strategic action at the global level reject securitization as a narrative. In an [op-ed \(https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/cities-marrakesh-migration-climate-by-georgios-kaminis-1-et-al-2018-12?barrier=accesspaylog\)](https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/cities-marrakesh-migration-climate-by-georgios-kaminis-1-et-al-2018-12?barrier=accesspaylog), the Mayors of Bristol, Kampala, and Milan denounced the “toxic political discourse on migration” at national and intergovernmental levels and highlighted the many ways migration can contribute to the development of cities. Similar statements can be found in the Mechelen Declaration ([download the Mechelen Declaration \(https://www.uclg.org/sites/default/files/mechelen-declaration-final.pdf\)](https://www.uclg.org/sites/default/files/mechelen-declaration-final.pdf)), which cities adopted to contribute to the Global Compact for Migration, as well as the 2018 Marrakech Mayors Declaration ([download the Marrakech Mayors Declaration \(https://www.gfmd.org/files/documents/mf5\\_declaration\\_en.pdf\)](https://www.gfmd.org/files/documents/mf5_declaration_en.pdf)). The crucial point cities make in the “migration and development narrative” is that migration has the potential to be a positive force for change – if it is well managed through jointly developed and vertically coherent policies. In order to create enabling environments for newcomers and locals alike, cities call upon national and

international decision-makers to develop joint action for improving local data generation, building local capacity to mainstream migration into urban planning and granting cities direct access to national and international funding.

## **The Urban Citizens Narrative**

To enable migrants and refugees to contribute to the urban society, cities push a second narrative, highlighting that “migrants and refugees are urban citizens.” Building on local action such as the **New York City ID** (<https://www1.nyc.gov/site/idnyc/index.page>), the Utrecht **Bed, Bath and Bread Programme** ([https://citiesofmigration.ca/good\\_idea/bed-bath-and-bread/](https://citiesofmigration.ca/good_idea/bed-bath-and-bread/)), or São Paulo’s **Municipal Council of Immigrants** (<https://gfmd.org/pfp/ppd/11556>), cities use fora like the GFMD, the GCM negotiations and the Global Refugee Forum to advocate for national support in opening up access to basic services or education to all urban residents – irrespective of legal status. In particular, the city network United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) is promoting a **Right to the City** (<https://www.uclg.org/en/tags/973>). While fully supporting the need for regular migration, local actors know from first-hand experience that asylum seekers and irregular migrants often spend months, if not years, in limbo. This may entail difficult situations for the whole city such as rising inequality. The current COVID-19 crisis is making it painfully clear that cities cannot afford to leave anyone behind, which is why the **Mayors Migration Council** (<https://www.mayorsmigrationcouncil.org/mmc-covid19>), **UCLG** (<https://www.uclg.org/en/issues/live-learning-experience-beyondtheoutbreak>), and the Mayors Mechanism ([download the Mayors Mechanism \(https://www.gfmd.org/files/documents/gfmd\\_mayors\\_mechanism\\_update\\_on\\_covid-19\\_april.pdf\)](https://www.gfmd.org/files/documents/gfmd_mayors_mechanism_update_on_covid-19_april.pdf)) are providing cities with tools for inclusive crisis communication and action. Moreover, the new **Ad Hoc GFMD Working Group on Public Narratives on Migration** (<https://www.gfmd.org/pfp/ppd/11966>), co-led by Canada and the Mayors Mechanism, will adopt a specific focus on COVID-19 in 2020.

## **The Human Rights Narrative**

Cities strengthen claims for inclusivity by underlining that “human rights apply to all.” In the last five years, municipal and regional leaders have increasingly questioned restrictive national policies by referring their own governments to international law or even engaging in strategic litigation to justify inclusive local action, as seen in the case of the **city of Utrecht** (<https://www.compas.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/City-Initiative-on-Migrants-with-Irregular-Status-in-Europe-CMISE-report-November-2017-FINAL.pdf>). In an **open letter to EU member states** (<https://ajuntament.barcelona.cat/alcaldesa/en/blog/we-cities-europe>), the Mayors of Barcelona, Paris, and Lesbos went a step further and offered reception of asylum seekers declaring that asylum meant not charity but the respect of human rights. Following the refusal of Euro-Mediterranean states to allow the rescue Ship Sea Watch 3 to dock, a coalition of German cities called upon the German Minister of the Interior to pursue a **humane and solidary German admission policy** ([https://seebruecke.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/offener\\_brief\\_an\\_bundesinnenmini.pdf](https://seebruecke.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/offener_brief_an_bundesinnenmini.pdf)) based on the respect of the UN Refugee Convention in 2019. Cities thus strengthen the legitimacy of their claims and actions by retranslating local strategies and perspectives into global human rights discourses, and may this way challenge or even change national policies.

## The Normalcy Narrative

Finally, cities counter crisis narratives such as the one of the “European refugee crisis” by emphasizing that “migration is a normal human phenomenon.” In fact, we cannot think about urbanization or modernization without reflecting on migration. While the history of cities like New York is narrowly connected to migration, it may be new to others, which had more stable populations over the last decades. The essential point is made by cities like Gaziantep – while highlighting that the high influx of Syrian refugees put the city into an exceptional situation, city representatives emphasize that in general, **migration is not a problem to be solved, but a phenomenon to be managed for the benefit of all** (<https://www.gmfus.org/blog/2020/06/01/gaziantep-migration-model-building-resilient-city-all-time-crisis>) in cooperation between local, national, and international actors.

## Speaking up—Cities Create Platforms to Make Their Voices Heard

With all four narratives, cities aspire to counter the ongoing polarization of migration and refugee policies and to work towards more outcome-oriented forms of multi-level governance emphasizing whole-of-society approaches, better funding flows, and two-way communication between local, national, and international actors. However, cities are still a long way from being recognized by states as actors in global migration governance. To succeed in shaping narratives in the long term, cities and their networks need platforms to formulate joint positions and access to intergovernmental debates. It is through the new Mayors Mechanism, led by IOM, MMC, and UCLG, that cities have a stronger standing in the GFMD. The Mechanism could thus be considered a sort of trial balloon for municipal engagement in further intergovernmental fora like the evaluation processes of the Global Compacts for Migration and Refugees. In cooperation with international organizations, national governments, civil society, and the private sector cities have the potential to establish “glocal” action to rethink migration as an opportunity for humanity.

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